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# Between Change and Persistence:

## Material Culture and Consumerism in 16th-century Frankfurt

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Based on the analysis of private inventories, testaments, commercial papers, guild statutes, and governmental decrees, this paper discusses the manifestations of material culture and consumerism in 16th-century Frankfurt on the Main. Germany's imperial city, it hosted fairs twice a year beginning in 1330, emerging in the late Middle Ages as a centre for both commercial and artisanal activities. In the second half of the 16th century, the town – Lutheran since 1533, but *de facto* multi-confessional after 1547 – became a melting pot of cultures, with a longstanding and steadily expanding Jewish community, and immigration from protestant Walloons and Flemings, among them jewellers, trim makers, and confectioners. Frankfurt, therefore, seems to be an appropriate case study for material culture and consumerism in a 16th-century German town<sup>1</sup>.

The 16th century was not calm for Frankfurt. In the early 1500s, the town was favoured by Maximilian I, but did not obtain a privileged position. In the 1520s, religious, economic, and political grievances provoked civil unrest: In 1525, Frankfurt's inhabitants rebelled against patrician and clerical hegemony. The introduction of the Reformation in 1533 endangered imperial favour; mid-century, the town therefore decided to abstain from participating in the protestant offensive against the emperor. Frankfurt came to regret its decision when the Protestant League besieged its walls in 1552. In the second half of the century, Frankfurt's relationship with the Habsburg court improved, with elections and coronations of German emperors taking place in the town. In the meantime, discord between common burghers and patrician families increased and led to a bloody uprising, which lasted, from 1612 and 1614, in what is commonly agreed upon as the end of Frankfurt's 16th century<sup>2</sup>.

Against this background, this paper examines the question of change and persistence in four sections focusing on the policing of consumerism, the culture of buying and selling, the range of available consumer goods, and the uses and deeper symbolism of material goods.

### 1. The policies of consumerism

Since the late Middle Ages, various governmental decrees and guild statutes stipulated not only the control and hierarchical ordering of consumers, but also consumer protection. Through

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<sup>1</sup> An indispensable resource for economic history: A. Dietz, *Frankfurter Handelsgeschichte*, vol. 1-4.2, Frankfurt am Main, Minjon/Knauer, 1910-1925.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Frankfurt's 16th-century political and social history: cf. *Frankfurt am Main. Die Geschichte der Stadt in neun Beiträgen*, Sigmaringen, Thorbecke, 1991; A. Johann, *Kontrolle mit Konsens. Sozialdisziplinierung in der Reichsstadt Frankfurt am Main im 16. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main, Kramer, 2001; M. Meyn, *Die Reichsstadt Frankfurt vor dem Bürgeraufstand von 1612 bis 1614. Struktur und Krise*, Frankfurt am Main, Kramer, 1980.

these rules and regulations, Frankfurt worked to create a secure and regulated space, which still gave considerable flexibility to both foreign and local consumers.

The tradition of Frankfurt's municipal law goes back to mid-14th century. In 1417, the town council decrees were systematically compiled for the first time, with a second compilation dating from 1487<sup>3</sup>. Through the end of the Early Modern period, Frankfurt's councillors set up a considerable body of ordinances (*Policeyordnungen*), many of them concerning commerce and consumption<sup>4</sup>. In addition to these written and printed decrees, the town codified its laws in 1509 under the title of *Reformation*, which was influenced by Roman law and mainly regulated procedural, contract, family, and inheritance law. This was renewed and extended in 1578, and was effective until the end of the 19th century.

The town council served as a legislative body, and was dominated by an oligarchical elite. During the 16th century, the 28 councillors of the two first benches (*Ratsbänke*) all belonged to one of Frankfurt's two patrician associations, *Alten-Limpurg* or *Frauenstein*, which were organised together as *Stubengesellschaften*<sup>5</sup>. The majority, 22 councillors, came from the *Alten-Limpurg*, with only a few members of the less-exclusive *Frauenstein* sitting on the second bench. The 15 councillors on the third bench were one retailer and 14 craftsmen drawn from a small elite of wealthy masters. The first and second bench had the right to elect two Burgomasters from their ranks, one from each bench. Moreover, the councillors of the first bench served as jury members for the town's highest court, the *Schöffengericht*, whose president, the *Schultheiß*, was formally the highest town official.

Alongside the town council, several other authorities played a role in Frankfurt. First and foremost was the emperor, the formal ruler of the imperial city. After him came the Archbishop of Mainz who, although the town had introduced the Reformation in 1533, regained his dominion over the residual catholic parishes and monasteries in 1547. The guilds, which maintained a limited autonomy during the 16th century, formed a third agent, but lost their influence in 1616, when they were abolished as independent corporations by the imperial administration following their rebellion against the patrician government. Finally, the Jewish community enjoyed a restricted form of self-government, and the Reformed Churches also seem to have achieved a certain measure of autonomy. To greater or lesser extents, each of these authorities controlled and influenced the town's commerce and consumption. Together, imperial laws and privileges, monastic liberties<sup>6</sup>, guildic restrictions, religious limitations, and municipal regulations formed a conglomerate of rules and customs.

Like other medieval and Early Modern towns, Frankfurt controlled and protected commercial activities inside its walls with a wide range of orders and institutions, securing a marketplace for both wholesale and retailing. In the context of a detailed contract law fixed in the municipal law of 1578, *Policeyordnungen* and guild statutes (which had to be confirmed by the town council) regulated most of the aspects of trading and selling. Furthermore, since the late Middle Ages, Frankfurt had established a system of surveillance that simultaneously protected the city's fiscal interests and ensured high quality and accurate measures for both merchants and consumers. Municipal officials and guild members inspected, weighed, measured, and marked all kinds of goods, particularly textiles, metals, and foodstuffs. Public buildings such as the linen house (*Leinwandhaus*) and the weigh house (*Stadtwaage*) were erected for this purpose.

<sup>3</sup> The early law books, including all sumptuary laws until 1468, are published in A. Wolf (ed.), *Die Gesetze der Stadt Frankfurt am Main im Mittelalter*, Frankfurt am Main, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. Halbleib, I. Worgitzki and K. Härter, *Repertorium der Policeyordnungen der Frühen Neuzeit*. Series: *Reichsstädte*. Vol. 1: *Frankfurt am Main*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Online biographical database on Frankfurt's patriciate at <http://www.frankfurter-patriziat.de>.

<sup>6</sup> The Dominicans, for instance, had the right to serve wine.

The town council not only supervised trade, it also policed consumption. Sumptuary law emerged in all the German states in the late Middle Ages, including Frankfurt. The oldest sumptuary law dates from 1356, and was promulgated during a plague epidemic<sup>7</sup>. It made mention of jewellery, clothes, furs, shoes, wedding gifts, and funeral ceremonies, but neglected baptism and lying-in, which did not appear in Frankfurt's sumptuary laws until 1418. The order of 1356 was annulled just one year after it was passed, with a reminder that everyone should keep in mind that their behaviour should be pleasing to God and useful for themselves. Evidently, this exhortation to personal responsibility did not go far enough, because in 1373, the town council enacted new regulations on dress concerning, among other details, the use of gold, silver, pearls, brocade, silk, velvet, embroidery, and trims. Another detailed sumptuary law was enacted in 1468 – once again during a time of plague – but this time explicitly excluding noblemen and academics.

In an order dating from 1488<sup>8</sup>, the main motivations were outlined and the regulations, which would guide every subsequent sumptuary law, were fixed. The law held that the arrogance and pride of Frankfurt's inhabitants enraged God, and their luxury destroyed wealth. The law constrained expenses relating to dress, marriage, childbirth, baptism, and funerals, and established clear classifications among the town's inhabitants by privileging town council members and dividing Frankfurt's burghers into ranks. Separated from craftsmen and shopkeepers, established families of rentiers, wholesale merchants, and councilmen were assigned to a privileged class, which enjoyed the right to dress and celebrate in more expensive ways. This division of the burgher community evidently provoked protest, as further comment on women's dress was required in 1490.

In 1576, again during a time of plague, the town council passed a new, even more extensive sumptuary law. The burgher community was divided into three ranks using a new label, which defined honourable and established families as patrician: *Ehrbare von den Geschlechtern*. Distinctions between them and the second (well-known merchants, councilmen, and high officials) and third (all other men) ranks were made clear in the quality and quantity of fur and silken fabrics, which they were allowed to use for doublets, trousers, trims, toques, and hats. In addition, the order particularly privileged the members of established families who also functioned as councillors and jurors (*Schöffen*), the first bench of the council. Like those exempted from town law – nobles, knights and doctors – they could wear velvet doublets and linings of marten fur. The town council also tried to curb the expense of fashionable clothing caused by high ruffs, slashed wide breeches, and slashed puffed sleeves. Regulations of women's dress were further extended to include not only dress, but also jewellery. In the case of women, regulations distinguished between four social groups instead of three, dividing the lowest class in half. With this division, women in the households of shopkeepers and craftsmen were separated from women of lower rank, particularly maidservants.

By 1590, the town council realized that the 1576 order was no longer sufficient, largely due to the social and economic development fuelled by Frankfurt's many immigrants. Walloons and Flemings had been arriving in Frankfurt since the middle of the century, and their numbers swelled after the conquest of Antwerp in 1585. The immigrants were accused of violating the sumptuary laws, thereby bringing divine punishment upon the city. Accordingly, a new order – once again during a time of plague – was enacted in 1597, although it was not printed until a year later. Unlike prior legislation, this new order explicitly commanded immigrants to obey

<sup>7</sup> For more on Frankfurt's sumptuary law, see the excellent article by I. Worgitzki, «Samthauben und Sendherren. Kleiderordnungen im frühneuzeitlichen Frankfurt», *Archiv für Frankfurts Geschichte und Kunst*, 68, 2002, p. 167–199, and Johann, *Kontrolle*, p. 187–214.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J.P. Orth, *Zusätze vieler wichtigen und merkwürdigen materien [...]*, Frankfurt am Main, Bayrhammer, 1775, p. 387–396.

the new rules. Some regulations were added to the existing order, particularly concerning collars and ruffs. However, first and foremost, the order presented a revised categorization of the town's inhabitants, with wealthy retailers, notaries, and lower officials now forming their own rank. Moreover, the order explicitly placed the ranks in a numerical order.

Offences against sumptuary law had been tried since 1530 by the *Sentenamt*, a municipal authority founded in the Reformation era, which was composed of six councillors, two from each bench. It was mainly responsible for crimes against morality, especially those concerning harlotry (*Hurerei*, i.e. extramarital sexuality), and, at least as far as the sumptuary law was concerned, dealt with Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics (except clerics), but not Jews. The *Sentenamt* was derived from a medieval clerical institution called the *Send* (from *synodus*). In Frankfurt, it had remained under Episcopal authority only until 1411; the town council had already taken over its jurisdiction before founding its own secular *Sentenamt* in 1530. In the first half of the 16th century, the six deputies of the town council did not meet regularly; only by the end of the century did their sessions become more frequent. A complaint by one of the town council's lower officials was one way to make an offence known, and denunciation was the other, with both officials and denunciators earning a percentage of the fine. Protest by the cited persons was customary, and it was possible to have the punishment rescinded or negotiate down to a reduced fine. If no agreement was found, the deputies of the *Sentenamt* referred the case to the town council.

Since all the records of the *Sentenamt* were destroyed in 1944, only a few notes describe how the councillors operated. A handful of cases are documented in an 18th-century chronicle<sup>9</sup>: Four of them cover the decade from 1488 (the year in which a new sumptuary law was published) to 1498, dealing only with patrician violation of dress regulations. Although the sources only provide indirect evidence of particularly noteworthy cases, they indicate that by the end of the 15th century the town council was actively trying to constrain extravagant dress among Frankfurt's elite. In doing this, the patrician councilmen protected their privileges against the burgher community, which was expected to present a modest and generally homogeneous appearance. However, modesty had to be enforced among the councilmen themselves, as well. In 1579 several members of the council dressed too fashionably, with wide slashed breeches, and were admonished to stop these extravagances.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of sources on this subject for the whole 16th century, but some excerpts from the records of the *Sentenamt* exist in a posthumously published study by Gottfried Schnapper-Arndt (1915)<sup>10</sup>. These records allow us to consider the activities of this authority shortly after the publication of the 1597 order. In contrast to earlier cases, defendants of patrician rank appeared not to be present; between 1602 and 1610, the *Sentenamt* cited German, Walloon, and Flemish tradesmen, craftsmen, innkeepers, and lower officials for an infraction of sumptuary law on the part of them or members of their households. These cases anticipated the quarrel that would break out between patricians and burghers in 1612. During the 16th century, sumptuary law had become more and more restrictive for Frankfurt's middle and lower ranks, while the concept of a homogenous community had lost relevance. Sixteenth-century legislation and jurisdiction favoured clear partition and distinction within society, which was difficult to achieve and maintain. Changing fashions and an altered social structure confronted a patrician oligarchy that dissociated itself from most of burgher society.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A.A. Lersner, *Der Weit-beruhmten Freyen Reichs-Wahl- und Handels-Stadt Franckfurt am Mayn Chronica, oder Ordentliche Beschreibung der Stadt Franckfurt*, t. 2.2, Frankfurt am Main, Recksroth, 1734, p. 250–251.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. G. Schnapper-Arndt, *Studien zur Geschichte der Lebenshaltung in Frankfurt a.M. während des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main, Baer, 1915, p. 391–399.

## 2. Buying and selling

Along with the privilege of holding markets, medieval and Early Modern towns generally played important roles in regional economies, and Frankfurt was no exception. However, its commercial hegemony was based on fairs, which developed slowly, allowing the neighbouring Mainz to remain a serious rival for some time. Nonetheless, by the early 16th century, praising Frankfurt as Germany's noblest emporium had already become a *topos* of *laus urbis*. Of course, contemporary writings also emphasised the fraud and temptations plaguing Frankfurt's commercial sphere<sup>11</sup>. Luther, for example, condemned Frankfurt as 'that silver and gold hole through which flows from German lands everything that flows, grows, or is coined and beaten', and several satires described rascals, usurers, and swindlers who allegedly invaded the town during fairs and caused trouble.

Walking the streets and squares of Frankfurt, a 16th-century consumer must have been faced with a dizzying array of shopping opportunities. Shops, stores, and cellars, hawkers' trays, market stalls, and stands during the fairs provided goods of nearly any kind. Male and female, local and foreign, Christian and Jewish, sellers tried to draw consumer's attention to their merchandise. They often cajoled potential clients and pulled them away from rival shops, despite the fact that this practice was clearly forbidden by municipal law and guild statutes.

Food and necessities could be bought at Frankfurt's market by every Christian inhabitant and – with some exceptions – by every Jew. The market took place on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Its organisation was similar to that of other towns: a municipal official, the *Mark(t)meister*, was authorised to open and end the market, to collect market fees, and to monitor and check buyers, sellers, and goods. Due to the rich offerings from gardeners, farmers, craftsmen, retailers, and second-hand dealers, Frankfurt's central square in front of the town hall was not large enough. Market stalls spilled over into several streets and squares of the old town, grouped according to the goods that they offered, such as bread, fish, poultry, eggs, vegetables, and household items. As space was so limited, guilds members tried to agree on the dimensions and positions of market stalls in order to avoid quarrels.

A wide range of goods could also be bought in the shops of resident merchants and craftsmen. The ground floors of Frankfurt's buildings usually served trade and industrial purposes, housing stores and workshops. Along the streets and inside larger courtyards, houses featured window openings with horizontal shutters (*Läden*), which converted into vending tables when lowered. Wooden porch roofs (*Schöpfe*) were installed above these tables in order to protect the merchandise. These shops were usually used by Frankfurt's craftsmen and retailers, but were also rented out to foreign tradesman during the fairs. In the narrow streets between town hall and St. Bartholomew, where most artisans and retailers had practised their business since the Middle Ages, and where every profession held a particular position, the *Läden* and *Schöpfe* were arranged in rows, thus forming a simpler and characteristic alternative to arcades. Several guilds limited the number of shops and stands that individual craftsmen were allowed to keep. Outside the fairs, they could sell either in their workshops or at the market. Shoemakers were obliged to sell ready-to-wear shoes exclusively in the guild's house, and butchers could not sell anywhere except under the *Schirn*, a street which was, consequently, named after the butchers' stalls.

Shops also could be found in the Jewish ghetto, the *Judengasse*. The economics of the 16th-century Jewish community are less well known than that of later centuries, but it can be assumed

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. R. Diehl, *Frankfurt am Main im Spiegel alter Reisebeschreibungen vom 15. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert. Nebst einem Anhang: Lobgedichte auf Frankfurt am Main*, Würzburg, Weidlich, 1984; J. Fried and H. Boockmann, *Die Frankfurter Messe. Besucher und Bewunderer. Literarische Zeugnisse aus ihren ersten acht Jahrhunderten*, Frankfurt am Main, Umschau-Verlag, 1990.

that Jewish retailers offered a wide range of new and second-hand goods. Jewish merchants probably offered everything that they had accepted as pawns, even though Jewish retail business in fabrics or spices was forbidden. Moreover, they clearly sold new ready-to-wear clothes that they had ordered from external dressmakers, in clear violation of the law. There can be no doubt that Christians frequently made use of these offers, which were a good value, just as Christians were regular buyers of the non-kosher meat that was a by-product of Jewish slaughtering.

The town council often felt compelled to remind Frankfurt's inhabitants of the observance of Holy Days<sup>12</sup>. Outside market hours, hawkers supplied food and necessities for the town's inhabitants. This kind of business was very common, although permission to sell in this way and acquisition of such goods were limited by the town council. Selling on Sundays and Holy Days was strictly forbidden for Christians; Jews were also obliged to close the doors of their shops, but might redeem pledges. Nevertheless, an illegal market seems to have taken place on Sundays in front of the entrance to the *Judengasse*, which supplied the Jews with food.

Exemption from most commercial restrictions was granted during the fairs. For at least four weeks annually (usually longer; the fairs were often prolonged), Frankfurt became a vast market place. When the English writer Thomas Coryate travelled to Frankfurt in 1608, he was surprised that the fair did not take place on a specific fairground, but in private houses. Actually, since the Middle Ages, the fairs had taken place everywhere in the old town centre. Some days before the fair began, Frankfurt's carpenters erected stands in streets, squares, churchyards, and quays. The market stalls that usually stood in these places had to be moved elsewhere, and wide areas of the town must have been occupied. Stands were also erected in the vaults of larger stone houses, and it is well documented that public buildings, such as the town hall (*Römer*), the linen house, and the former cloister of the Discalced Friars, which the town had owned since 1529, housed merchants' stands. It can be assumed that guilds and even fraternities rented out their rooms, as well. Privately owned groups of buildings arranged around a courtyard (*Höfe*), most of them controlled by patrician families, offered spaces for both accommodation and sales. Acquaintances would take up residence together in such places, and often rented the same premises for every fair.

During the fairs, amusement joined commerce. In addition to comedians and musicians, the fairs attracted tradesmen who practised sales strategies such as raffles, auctions, and performances by *ciarlatani*. There are some hints that in the 16th century such amusements attracted people from both the lower and higher ranks. A list of municipal raffle winners published in 1582 shows that even members of patrician families and councillors participated in such gambling. Such enjoyment may have been made possible by the pocket money that Frankfurt's householders handed out to their wives, children, and servants during the fairs. In the late 17th century, the heads of patrician families noted such donations in their household books, and it is possible that this custom began much earlier.

### 3. The range of consumer goods

In contrast to modern times, Frankfurt's Early Modern fairs were in no way exclusively designed for business transactions; they also offered opportunities for shoppers to buy necessary or precious things for personal use. Foreign merchants usually furnished themselves, their families, and their friends with goods that they could not obtain at home, such as toques, eyeglasses, cheeses, and barrels of vinegar. Similarly, the princes of Frankfurt's surrounding territories not only purchased clothing for their courts, but also luxuries for themselves and their families, and the reigning prince was obliged to pay a certain sum of money (*Meßgeld*) to his

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<sup>12</sup> As a Lutheran town, Frankfurt did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1700. Thus, in the late 16th century, Holy Days still followed the Julian calendar.

minor relatives for just this purpose. Usually, the princes charged an official or an agent to deal with shopping at Frankfurt's fairs, but princes and princesses also seem to have visited them in person, as well.

Fairs doubtlessly stimulated Frankfurt's market for all kind of goods, but particularly for jewellery and precious fabrics that established the town's fame as a treasury. The most costly merchandise, jewels, and precious metals were displayed and sold at the noblest place in Frankfurt, inside and beneath the town hall (*Römer*). Such items were not only traded, but also made in Frankfurt. After Walloon and Flemish immigrants had brought in capital and expertise, artisan production began to flourish. Costly treasures such as cups, portrait medals, and necklaces mainly attracted a noble clientele, but smaller pieces were within the means of some particularly successful burghers.

Apart from jewellery, precious metalwork, and other products of the goldsmiths' workshops, contemporary *laus urbis*, surprisingly, appeared to ignore the fine arts when praising Frankfurt's commerce, although some works of art were sold during the fairs. In the 16th century artisans had their stands at the former cloister of the Discalced Friars, where Agnes Dürer offered her husband's woodcuts in 1505 and 1506. Such woodcuts and engravings were perfect consumer goods, and Renaissance artists and artisans knew how to meet the demand. As a great number of painters worked in Early Modern Frankfurt, the town probably had a flourishing art market. In the late 16th century, the workshops of the Valckenborch Brothers and the still-life painter Georg Flegel produced a series of similar Flemish-style paintings, and it is quite possible that they painted smaller pieces for general sale, in addition to commissioned works.

Silk trims, a highly fashionable good, were another luxury that was increasingly produced in Frankfurt. When, in 1583, the Town Council ordered the inspection of trims in response to complaints of novel and unregulated products, producers argued that fashions changed so rapidly that established standards were impossible. Patterns for cords and braids changed daily, and producers had to follow buyers' tastes. These fashionable trims were very much in demand throughout the late 16th century, as evidenced by the fact that Frankfurt's town council limited their use as early as 1576.

Silken fabrics from Italy, France, and the Netherlands was another important type of merchandise found at fairs of the late 16th century. Drapers sold their goods, for example, in the Nürnberger Hof, one of the largest and oldest Höfe owned by the patriciate. Here, merchants from southern Germany who traded in Italian luxuries generally found accommodation. Frankfurt clearly offered the finest fabrics in Western Europe, which could not be bought even in Nuremberg. In 1584, Magdalena Paumgartner, a wealthy merchant's wife from Nuremberg, demanded that her husband buy linens from Frankfurt<sup>13</sup>. Magdalena Paumgartner also ordered a dozen cheap, ready-made linen ruffs with holes instead of laces, which she needed for a childbed shirt. She preferred to buy them instead of sewing them herself; she argued that the required fabric was not guaranteed to be available in Nuremberg, and that making them herself would take too much time. Frankfurt's fairs clearly must have offered fashionable accessories such as ruffs and toques, which were routinely produced all over Europe. Frankfurt's craftsmen also met the demand for ready-to-use goods; foreign visitors in town only for a couple of weeks could not wait for clothes, shoes, or pewter dinnerware to be made to order. Frankfurt's pewterers, for example, noted in 1609 that they had needed six months to produce all the tin goods intended for sale at the fair.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fried/Boockmann, *Frankfurter Messe*, p. 93–98.



However, the selling of ready-made products outside of fairs was a thorn in the guilds' side<sup>14</sup>. In 1579, the tailors' guild complained about shopkeepers in Frankfurt who sold imported clothes such as trousers, breeches, shirts, and stockings. As discussed earlier, Jews were often engaged in this business, but Christian merchants also undoubtedly brought ready-made clothes into town. In 1588, the tailor's guild accepted that some masters and their workers (*Gesinde*) could continue to produce ready-made goods (*zu failem kauff*), but forbade the selling of imported ready-to-wear goods. Those who were not guild members, the *Störer*, were allowed to sell what their families had produced, but they could not hire any additional labourers.

Other guilds took other measures. The carpenters' and cabinet-makers' guilds limited the number of products that a master could present in his stall: only one bedstead and one dresser (*triesur*, a fashionable piece of furniture) were allowed. The order also anticipated how vendors might try to work around it, and pre-emptively forbade placing one's products in another master's stall. Bakers' guild statutes in 1595 stipulated that pastry chefs (*Kuchenbäcker*) could bake bread and rolls for sale, with cake only allowed during the fairs and on the highest Holy Days. Furthermore, the guild forbade German masters from adopting recipes from their Walloon or Flemish colleagues, and vice versa. In 1608, the furriers' guild completely prohibited the production of innovative goods outside of a special order from a client, a questionable remedy against competition from immigrants.

Ready-to-use goods were also sold by retailers who specialised in low-priced articles, or 'penny goods' (*Pfennigwerthwahren* or *Pfenwert*). Nuremberg was one of the most important exporters of such trumpery, and *Nürnberger Waren* were well known. Since selling these wares often meant violating guild monopolies, the guilds of pewterers, knitters, tapestry makers, and toque makers successfully banned such goods as far as their crafts were concerned.

Books, another type of merchandise often found at Frankfurt's fairs, can hardly be described as 'ready-to-use' goods, as new books were traded unbound, and needed to be taken to a bookbinder before they were in a condition to read. Only second-hand books, broadsheets, and pamphlets could be immediately read, and these types of prints were certainly sold at fairs. However, retail sales of new, unbound books (*Handverkauf*) by printers, publishers, and book retailers (*Buchführer*) seems to have played a significant role, as well.

#### 4. The use and appropriation of things

It is intriguing to move beyond the records of what was bought and sold and to instead consider the more philosophical side of 16th-century consumption. What did shopping mean, and what did belongings mean to their owners? Frankfurt's sources only hint at the answers in occasional references to style of dress and interior furnishings.

When Bernhard Rohrbach – a member of Frankfurt's patriciate in the second half of the 15th century – wrote his *liber gestorum*, he gave a detailed description of some of the precious clothes that he and his friends had worn for festivities such as Christmas, Corpus Christi, carnivals, and weddings<sup>15</sup>. He even added a drawing of a delicate embroidered sleeve and noted the weight of the silver thread used. The clothes were made from costly fabrics in different colours, ornamented with silver and decorated with pictures and mottoes. The young men utilised them as signs, symbolising wealth, precedence, piety, togetherness, or refinement.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. K. Bücher and B. Schmidt, *Frankfurter Amts- und Zunfturkunden bis zum Jahre 1612*. Vol. 1.1-1.2: *Zunfturkunden bis zum Jahr 1612*, Frankfurt am Main, Baer, 1914.

<sup>15</sup> B. Rohrbach, «Liber gestorum», in R. Froning (ed.), *Frankfurter Chroniken und annalistische Aufzeichnungen des Mittelalters*, Frankfurt am Main, Jügel, 1884, p. 181–223, p. 220–221; A.A. Lersner, *Der Weit-berühmten Freyen Reichs-Wahl- und Handels-Stadt Franckfurt am Mayn Chronica, oder Ordentliche Beschreibung der Stadt Franckfurt*, vol. 1.1, Frankfurt am Main, Lersner, 1706, p. 313.

Rohrbach's *liber gestorum* points to the enormous importance of dress for those in Frankfurt's patrician circles on the eve of the 16th century.

When expressing themselves, it is likely that young elite men often ignored sumptuary laws. In 1488, the town council admonished the *junge Gesellen*<sup>16</sup> not to wear velvet clothes or pearl and golden necklaces. In 1504 they were addressed with similar demands as Frankfurt prepared to host a session of the imperial diet (which never actually took place). In this order, the young men were instructed to abstain from wearing expensive clothing and to behave respectfully towards princes and noblemen.

Sumptuary law seemed to imply that the sole motivation for people who wore clothes not associated with their rank and station was to usurp a higher social status. In 1488, Frankfurt's town council punished Johann von Rükingen, a member of *Alten-Limpurg* and courtier of Maximilian I, for wearing a velvet doublet and a golden necklace, both representing Johann's knighthood of the Holy Grave that he had acquired in 1487. Perhaps Johann merely associated a nostalgic memory of his pilgrimage with his precious clothes, and saw them as a testimony to his piety, but in the eyes of the town council, Johann's 'unseemly' behaviour was proof of nothing but his arrogance. Even though the *Schultheiß* and an official of Maximilian supported Johann's request, the town council let him know that as a burgher of Frankfurt, he should 'conduct himself like others'. When Johann persisted, the quarrel escalated. The town made an example of him, threatening to expel him and finally arresting him and holding him prisoner in the tower. With their strong connections with honour and status, questions of dress sometimes led to serious conflicts that proved difficult to settle.

Sixteenth-century probate inventories reveal that Frankfurt's inhabitants possessed (and likely wore) forbidden items of clothing. Burghers who were found guilty often confronted their accusers with remarkable self-confidence and remorselessness. When Katharina, the wife of Philipp Mohr, presented herself at the *Sentenamt* in 1603, she threw down her bonnet of velvet, her golden laces, and her sheath of silver and invoked the imperial law and her 'female liberties'<sup>17</sup>. This woman was not only the wife of a wealthy butcher, wine dealer, and mercenary, but her father-in-law had been a councillor, and a sketch of a glass painting ordered by Katharina and Philipp Mohr in 1596 seems to confirm their burgher's pride<sup>18</sup>. In the same way, the wealthy merchant Johann Mahieu, the grandson of a Walloon immigrant who fell into Frankfurt's highest tax bracket, rejected the *Sentenamt*'s verdict that he should pay a fine of 40 florins because his wife had worn velvet-decorated clothes and golden rings. He claimed 'discretion'<sup>19</sup> and wondered why merchants should not be allowed to dress more expensively than 'tailors and shoemakers'. Mahieu later became a leader of the oppositional burgher committee that, in 1612, called for more participation by common burghers in the town's government.

Inside the home, Frankfurt's inhabitants had more freedom since sumptuary law was not extended to furnishings until 1731. The town's wealthier housewives probably took as great pains over interior decoration as did the Nuremberg merchant's wife, Magdalena Paumgartner, who knew exactly what kind of fabric she wanted for her home. She demanded that her husband procure a black-in-green silken fabric from the Netherlands for a tablecloth and bedcover. A blue cotton that her husband had already sent to her was not to her liking; she found it to have a strange colour and it looked like mere linen. Magdalena proposed reselling the blue fabric and

<sup>16</sup> *Gesellen* here probably means the members of the patrician *Stubengesellschaften*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Schnapper-Arndt, *Studien*, vol. 1, p. 392.

<sup>18</sup> Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum, Sammlung der Kunstakademie, KA (FP) 5473.

<sup>19</sup> Schnapper-Arndt, *Studien*, p. 392. The sources do not reveal whether Mahieu meant the ability to clothe himself 'at his own discretion' or a more discreet handling of his affairs.

buying a piece of 'nice green taffeta; as she had seen in another woman's house. Taffeta, she convincingly wrote to her husband, was not prone to moths, and green would match the rest of the interior<sup>20</sup>.

Far from being a secluded private sphere, early modern interiors communicated nuanced meaning to inhabitants or visitors. In probate inventories, this can be seen from particular arrangements of goods or 'object domains'<sup>21</sup>. Almost every household owned, for example, decorative equipment for hand washing, such as cans, bowls, and towels, often placed on dressers situated in common areas (*Stuben*). Used for ritual hand washing, symbolising purity, these utensils were crafted with great diligence: hand-made towels with fringes and laces, bowls depicting Annunciation scenes, and dressers bearing family crests.

Sixteenth-century people were doubtlessly very attached to such possessions. According to wills from this time period, not only precious objects, but well-used and hand-made belongings were bequeathed thoughtfully to friends and relatives. Even municipal law gave some of these objects particular significance: According to the *Ernewerte Reformation* of 1578, objects with family crests, as well as costly books, were to be withheld from sale when household effects were sold on behalf of orphans.

## 5. Material culture and consumerism in Early Modern Germany

For a long time, German historiography disregarded Early Modern material culture and consumerism; it still widely ignores the 16th and 17th centuries. By studying Frankfurt, this paper offers a glimpse of consumer opportunities and constraints in a 16th-century imperial town. To better understand Germany's history of consumption requires further research, placing this paper in the context of the larger temporal and geographical framework.

An exploration of sumptuary law in Frankfurt reveals the political significance of consumption and shows how questions of dress and expense intermingled with beliefs about power, honour, status, and identity. It testifies to a great variety of commercial offerings and merchandise, coupled with a wide range of consumer motivations and decisions. In contrast to everyday restrictions on commerce and consumption, the fairs offered remarkable freedom and choice, presenting an opposing commercial and economical principle. In many respects, Frankfurt's 16th-century commerce and consumption both testifies to the persistence of late medieval conditions and highlights the changes of the Early Modern era.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Fried/Boockmann, *Frankfurter Messe*, p. 93–98.

<sup>21</sup> J. Brewer, «Was können wir aus der Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit für die moderne Konsumgeschichte lernen?», in H. Siegrist et al. (ed.), *Europäische Konsumgeschichte. Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18. bis 20. Jahrhundert)*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 1997, p. 51–74, p. 54.